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ABSTRACT

To be defined by age as a pupil or student is to be made subject to a system that functions as a total institution, in a society that prides itself on choice and pluralism. What justifies this, in nearly every nation in the world is that fact that the school is accepted throughout the society as the gateway to opportunity; and individual advancement as the most desirable personal goal. Considering the uses to which such talent as has already been identified are put in most societies of the world, this seems both a dubious and circular justification. When the society becomes polarized, the schools come to be considered by those rejecting its more conventional values as instruments of propaganda or repression. If those rejecting the society's values comprise its more privileged youth, both their elders and the underclass are intolerably threatened. A paradoxical alliance then develops between members of the underclass and spokesmen of the establishment to defend the schools against such derogation and abandonment. (JM)

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SHIFTING CONCEPTIONS OF LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN A POLARIZED SOCIETY

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Perhaps the most astonishing aspect of modern attitudes toward learning is the assumption--nearly universal in contemporary societies however disparate these may be in their social systems or stage of technical development--that learning must be the consequence of education, and must take place in a school, if the learner expects it to be recognized by other members of society. This cannot, surely, express any widely-shared conviction that the school is where most important human learning takes place; since all of us know from our own experience that most of the learning that has proved vitally important to us occured without or despite any formal effort to teach us and, if it took place in school at all, was independent of and often in conflict with the official curriculum. Ivan Illich, most notably among modern critics of formal education, has explored this paradoxical assumption and its consequences very thoroughly in his new book Deschooling Society[1],

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[1] New York. Harper & Row, 1971

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and has offered concrete suggestions for the organization of state support for learning opportunities through arrangements altogether different from schools. Yet, as Illich further suggests, the fact that throughout the world schooling, unlike banking, say, or religious worship, is virtually the same kind of experience run by the same kinds of people,

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while no other way of facilitating learning has been vouchsafed legitimacy, attests to the high social stakes involved.

Those stakes are nothing less than the socialization process itself; while the curriculum serves chiefly as the pretext for keeping the pupil in school--and hence defined as a pupil--where socialization is least easily evaded--and as a source of official wisdom. Parents who teach their children to read--or, worse yet, permit them to pick the skill up spontaneously and then follow their own interests in learning--are not perceived as facilitators of learning any more than counterfeiters are regarded as contributors to the gross national product, and for the same reason: the essence of their deed, from the point of view of the rest of society, is that by doing it themselves thay are evading the state's control of access to available rewards.

So long as there is fairly general agreement that those rewards are both legitimate and desirable, schools will be supported in their hegemony over the experience of those defined in the society as young. The comprehensiveness of this support is, indeed astonishing; no comparable set of interlocking sanctions protects any other social institution. It is unlawful for a citizen of school age to pursue his interests, however legitimate they might otherwise be, outside school during the time allotted to it. For this reason, alternative institutions that do not call themselves schools do not develop, or are treated as illegitimate and shady, or pejoratively defined as entertainment and hence not to be taken seriously as sources of learning. In order to survive, moreover, even these must become so commercial that they reinforce the socializing effects of the schools, especially those

aspects directed toward establishing patterns of consumption. A few genuinely liberating places of resort like coffee-houses or hostels for "runaways"--the very concept of a "runaway" demonstrates the community's socializing zeal--are established under meager subsidies from churches or philanthropic foundations. But these, characteristically, are hassled out of existence for tolerating violations of drug laws, or for "harboring" runaways if they appear to be developing into effective centers of countersocialization. The drug laws themselves, selectively define as dangerous and felonious to possess chemical substances that "destroy the will to achieve", thus impeding the socialization process in the schools, even though the most commonly used of these are physiologically more innocuous than the commonplace drugs found in every bathroom cabinet or many authorized food additives.

Even ordinary human relationships between adults and persons of school age are suspect and forbidden, unless officially sanctioned by the parent or the school, by laws defining such contacts as loitering or molestation. To be defined by age as a pupil or student is thus to be made subject to a system that functions as a total institution, in a society that prides itself on choice and pluralism. What justifies this, in nearly every nation in the world is that fact that the school is accepted throughout the society as the gateway to opportunity; and individual advancement as the most desirable personal goal. Both socialist and capitalist societies share this commitment and justify it as the underlying dynamic of a talent-search upon which the public interest depends.

Considering the uses to which such talent as has already been identified are put in most societies of the world, this seems both a dubious and a circular justification: circular in that those attributes are defined as "talent" that express the values and advance missions already dominant in the society. There really is something remarkable about a country that, while tolerating some of the worst slums this side of, oh, Calcutta, will continually sift them in search of the kind of child who might conceivably be trained to play a part in putting a man with a little tin flag on the moon; or an end to vegetable and animal, including human life in Indochina. The notion that the talent-search in an open society encourages social innovation ignores the rigidity with which what constitutes talent is defined, and the heavyhandedness with which other human characteristics that might have been equally valued are suppressed or dismissed and ignored. But the process works, and the schools and colleges are respected and supported for their part in it, as long as the society is not sharply divided about the desirability of the talent-search, or the rewards to which it leads those deemed talented, so that those who reject such rewards may be dismissed as aberrant, disturbed, or like the rest of the failures, merely incompetent.

This observation may appear to be contradicted by the fact that serious and disruptive controversy about education has been endemic in America for more than a century, as the set of papers edited by Michael B. Katz in the recent School Reform: Past and Present[2] makes clear in abundant detail. I would submit, however.

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[2] Boston, Little Brown, 1971

that earlier educational controversy consistently centered on the deployment of the schools and of the educational resources they were thought to represent. There were conflicts about who should be educated, to borrow from the title of a little educational classic of the forties[3], and at whose expense, not about whether institution-

[3] W. Lloyd Warner, Robert J. Havighurst, and Martin B. Loeb, Who Shall Be Educated? New York, Harper and Bros., 1944.

alized education was harmful or oppressive per se. Curiously, this issue does not seriously arise even under conditions of outright imperialism, so long as the dominant national or ethnic group will, in fact, admit "qualified" members of the subordinated or discriminated group to its numbers and permit them to compete with a reasonable chance of success in its status system. On the contrary, imperialism then provides the classic context for increased controversy about access to educational institutions, in which the schools are attacked by ambitious members of subordinated groups for not being successful enough in belatedly helping them to develop the desired imperial attributes. This controversy appears to become most intense in situations, now very common in the United States where the school system itself has provided the basis for social mobility for lower status ethnic groups, in which a conspicuously uptight lower-middle class school bureaucracy stands between potentially qualified blacks and upper-middle class or Ivy League aspirations. A black student headed for Princeton through the public schools of Boston or New York must first demonstrate characteristics acceptable to predominantly Irish or Jewish school personnel, in order to obtain a suitable

credential with which to apply; and these characteristics will probably be as helpful to him at Princeton as mercury is to a swordfish; they won't kill him, but they won't greatly enhance his market value. It is hardly astonishing that bitter conflict ensues; but it would be a gross misunderstanding to construe the anger of many blacks at America's urban schools as directed at the process of schooling itself. They demand better schools and more schooling and their anger, far from constituting a threat, may provide the last best hope for a system the middle class--its former supporters--seems increasingly inclined to write off altogether as a tax loss.

Many school officials and, especially, college presidents, are aware of this, of course, and this awareness is leading to one of the more interesting developments in the course of society's current polarization. While middle class college-bred young radicals continue to seek, with consistent and sometimes lethal lack of success, to make common cause with the blue-collar workers and blacks whose grievances against the society they, and they alone, see as identical with their own, officials of educational institutions have, from the time of the crisis at Columbia in spring of 1968, responded to the demands of black students rather more patiently and with less proneness to resort to police violence than they have to white militants, whom they seem to genuinely hate.[4] And they, unlike the

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[4] There has, of course, been most lethal oppression at all-black state-supported southern schools like Jackson State. But in such cases the administration of the school has very little opportunity, vis-a-vis local police autonomy, to influence the train of events at all.

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young radicals, seem to be having some success in, if not forming

an alliance, at least retaining their customers. Simultaneously, and perhaps in recognition of the blue-collar American's lack of rhetorically gifted spokesmen--at least in comparison with the overabundantly endowed black movement--a new and more generous appraisal is being given the working class as a promising non-elite source of recruits for America's elite universities. In this respect Thomas J. Cottle's recently published Time's Children: Impressions of Youth[5] sounds a novel and rather disturbing note, which is likely

[5] Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971

to increase in volume in the near future. The book is very keenly observed, perceptively written, and often movingly expressed. It is also, essentially, a Dear John letter to America's young militant middle-class collegians--especially the victims of Harvard's celebrated University Hall bust--telling them in measured terms just how nice it was to have known them and extending an attitude of cautious but open-minded sympathetic inquiry to some of the elements of society most outraged by them: the community of Wellesley, for example, where Mrs. Cottle was arrested and charged with obscenity because, as a drama teacher in the high school, she had assisted in the production of LeRoi Jones' The Slave. His chapter "College and Career Night in Bristol Township" is a superb evocation of what the chance to attend a state college in Pennsylvania means to the high school graduates and their parents of a largely working-class Pennsylvania school district; and of how limited that chance really is. But, as a picture of their motives and their grasp of what a college is or might be--and of what they would refuse to tolerate if it became more--this

account inspires horror rather than, as I think it was intended to do, a desire to bring a college education within the grasp of a difficult, but potentially promising clientele. There may be worse ways of spending a life than in helping the people of Bristol Township to meet what they conceive to be the educational needs of their children; but it is too soon to forget that the young men and women broken up and imprisoned in the Harvard bust were the victims of what they represent in American life; and, in this sense, their victims too.

But that is a matter of personal values; empirically, one can say only that, especially for state university administrations, the era of the common man, as a source of trouble-free, docile and appreciative students, is about to begin. What the Yankelovich research organization calls the Career-Minded majority of college students, as distinct from the Forerunner student group, composed mostly of young people whose parents also attended college, "who are most vocal in their disaffection with the 'system,' most concerned with social change and most willing (in contrast to their career-minded peers) to make a personal commitment"[6] have now captured the attention of both state legislatures and academic executives. The Yankelovich Organization itself takes the position

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[6] Youth and the Establishment: A Report on Research for John D. Rockefeller 3rd and the Task Force on Youth by Daniel Yankelovich, Inc. (New York, The JDR 3rd Fund, Inc., 1971, p. 16n.)

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in this Report that the Forerunner group, though a minority, still remains decisively important to the future of the nation because it

represents what the majority of next generation collegians will be like as well as the position of already taken by the sons and daughters of those currently in leadership positions in society. The purpose of their Report, indeed, is to find a "basis for collaboration" between the young members of this Forerunner group and their elders, so that their alienation may be reduced before they are lost to the system altogether. Just how successful this effort is meeting may be judged from the following quotation, presented as illustrative of the attitude of an elder favorably disposed toward the Forerunners:

"The president of a major corporation expressed it this way:

> 'As a parent, and as a citizen, I sometimes feel I'd like to take these kids and horsewhip them into sense. I'm sick of their arrogance, hostility, and disdain of the dollar. In my rational moments as a businessman and president of a corporation I know this attitude is neither right, practical, nor permissible. We--you and I--need these young people as a talent pool for industry, to provide national leadership for the future, and for that matter as customers.'" [7]

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[7] Ibid. p. 34

Disdain for the dollar does--God save the mark--appear to be spreading; and these comments sum up the attitudes of America s elite toward its children very succinctly: with parents like these, who needs enemies? America's educational leaders are beginning to suggest to such executives, in effect, that they don't need these young people as a talent pool for industry or, for that matter as customers. Hordes of the Career-Minded stand eager to take their place, thus fulfilling the promise of opportunity in an open society.

But what about "national leadership for the future?" Considering the way education, and especially higher education is supported in America, is it realistic to expect schools to continue to be lavishly funded if they fulfill the American dream so well that they become the truly revolutionary instrument by which the children of the aspiring working class supplant those of the people who still retain the pursestrings? So far as city and state-supported institutions are concerned, undoubtedly. But private colleges and universities, and especially those in the Ivy or Plastic Ivy leagues, may not be able to refocus as easily on a lower-status and more docile clientele. The outraged alumni and trustees of Northwestern University are indeed withholding support from their school as they perceive it to be infested with radicals who are their own children. But that does not mean that they will continue to pick up the tab willingly if their own children are replaced by the sons of Mayor Daley's Bridgeport neighbors; or that the young people of Bridgeport would come if there were no North Shore youngsters at Northwestern to serve as role-models and contacts and maybe even friends. The Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, to which Cottle devotes another of his more revealing chapters, is nearer, cheaper, and easier of access. It is the crowning irony of America's commitment to egalitarianism that its elite turned out, in the latest generation, at least, to be a real one; with some crucially aristocratic characteristics including a preference for social commitment to careerism; and for a water bed you can rest on to laurels that--in so open and competitive a society--you cannot. America's educational system, it now appears, did, indeed, succeed in conveying a sense of the basic values of western civilization to the best and most constant

of its students; thereby establishing a standard on the basis of which it and the society of which it is a basic component might be judged and found wanting. The current confusion of the educational system is understandable and ought perhaps to evoke a measure of sympathy. Its spokesmen had grown so accustomed to earning their living by lying to the young that they failed to notice that the stuff they were pushing had not been cut as much as they thought and was still capable of evoking a very compelling vision of what a good life might be, instead of the bummer they had been on. In the grim clarity of this dawn's early light, the most troublesome question remaining unresolved may simply be: Who is to pay the dealer?